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Brief note on proposed regional project on "Improvement of local building materials" sponsored by ACC* Task Force on Science and Technology for Development

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* Administrative Committee on Co-ordination of the United Nations.

INTRODUCTION

1. The United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development held in Vienna in August 1979 1/ stressed the need to bridge the gap between developed and developing countries and to strengthen the endogenous capacities of developing countries in science and technology. An operational plan for the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action on Science and Technology for Development adopted by the Conference recommended the identification of activities in the field of science and technology to be implemented jointly by organizations of the United Nations system.

2. In its resolution 34/218 2/ the General Assembly of the United Nations endorsed the Vienna programme of Action on Science and Technology for Development, decided to establish an Intergovernmental Committee on Science and Technology for Development and requested the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC) to assist the Intergovernmental Committee at the latter's request. Subsequently a special Task Force of ACC identified 24 project proposals to be implemented jointly by about 30 specialized institutions of the United Nations system. All member States of the UN, and particularly developing countries, have already been contacted by the United Nations Centre for Science and Technology for Development to express their particular interest in one or the other of the 24 project proposals.

3. Among these proposals is one entitled "Improvement of local building materials". The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been designated by the ACC Task Force as the lead agency for this project. FAO is co-operating in this endeavour with the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS/Habitat), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

4. The project has been planned on a global basis but in view of the peculiarities of problems in the various regions, and in order to achieve tangible and practical results that would contribute in a meaningful way to the increased utilization of local building materials in the developing countries, FAO has recommended the adoption of a regional approach to the implementation of the project. On this basis a regional project for Africa has been designed by FAO with the active collaboration of ECA and experts from selected African countries. The project proposal takes due account of the foundation already laid by the ECA programme for the development of building materials and construction industries which has been financed to-date by the United Nations Development Programme. Because of the close linkage of the building materials industry with other sectors of the national economy including food and agriculture, industry, transport, human settlements, education, science and technology, its development is necessarily a continuous process. The ACC Task Force project on the improvement of local building materials is therefore expected to enhance that process and contribute to the alleviation of current problems associated with the availability of building materials for housing and building programmes in the countries of the African region.

1/ See Report of the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development Vienna, 20-31 August 1979 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.79.I.2 and corrigenda).

2/ Res. 34/218 United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, 23 January 1980.

5. This brief note on the project has been prepared by ECA secretariat, at the request of FAO headquarters, for consideration by the Joint Intergovernmental Regional Committee on Human Settlements and Environment.

OBJECTIVES AND OUTPUTS OF THE PROJECT

6. The rationale behind the formulation of the project is that a wealth of knowledge already exists in African countries on how a number of local building materials could be developed and used in housing and building projects in both urban and rural areas. The main problem to-date has been one of translating this accumulated knowledge into concrete projects which could serve as stimuli for the future development, improvement and use of local building materials. The proposed regional project will thus aim at addressing the main factors that have hitherto served as hindrances to the widespread use of local building materials.

7. Within the overall objective of promoting the use of locally available building materials 3/ in the countries of the African region, the project will have the following immediate objectives:

(i) To identify and upgrade appropriate building techniques based on local building materials;

(ii) To stimulate education, research and training in order to maintain and improve technologies and skills in the production and use of local building materials;

(iii) To encourage the active involvement of governments, the building industry and the building planners/designers in promoting the use of appropriate local building materials.

(iv) To assist countries in the formulation and execution of projects to develop or promote the use of local building materials; and

(v) To stimulate collaboration of activities relating to local building materials within United Nations agencies.

8. The outputs of the project are expected to make significant contributions to national, subregional and regional efforts geared to enhancing and sustaining the rational and increased use of proven local building materials in housing and building programmes. Among the planned outputs are the following:

(i) Manuals on the manufacture and use of specific local building materials;

(ii) Subregional pilot plants to demonstrate the production of roofing and binding materials;

(iii) Model buildings demonstrating the use of available local building materials;

(iv) Feasibility studies leading to national projects for the use of local building materials;

(v) Teaching materials (books, slides, films);

3/ In this context "local building materials" refers to those building materials which are based on locally available raw materials and which can be produced and utilized with locally available skill and equipment.

(vi) Subregional centres at existing institutions for teaching, training, research and research co-ordination for promoting local building materials;

(vii) Trained personnel (architects, engineers, artisans).

FINANCING OF PROJECT

10. The project is estimated to cost about US$2.5 million over a five year period. The funds required for implementation of the project are to be mobilized with the assistance to the ACC Task Force on Science and Technology for Development and the participating United Nations agencies. Already FAO has allocated an amount of US$28,000 for preparatory work for the project including the preparation of the project document, a "state of the art" report and a detailed work programme for the project.

11. The project is conceived as an "umbrella" project under which participating countries will be stimulated to initiate national projects geared to specific local needs and conditions. The regional project will assist in the formulation and mobilization of resources for the implementation of such national projects.

COMMENCEMENT OF PROJECT

12. The implementation of the project is tentatively scheduled to start on 1 June 1984 depending on the successful mobilization of the required funds. Some preparatory activities have however, been already undertaken by FAO as the lead agency. A draft project document prepared by FAO was discussed by an inter-agency committee comprising representatives of FAO, ECA, UNCHS (Habitat), UNESCO and UNIDO during the CIB-RILEM 4/ symposium on appropriate building materials for low-cost housing held at Nairobi, Kenya in November 1983. The committee decided that the document should be revised to reflect the decisions and recommendations of the above symposium.

13. Subsequently, the project document was revised by a group of four experts from African countries invited by FAO together with representatives of FAO and ECA during a week's working session at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in December 1983. The project document is currently being finalized by FAO for submission to the ACC Task Force on Science and Technology for Development.

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS

14. The successful implementation of this regional project will require the active support and involvement of the governments of African countries. Specifically, the Governments are expected, inter alia, to:

(i) Indicate their interest in participating in the project;

(ii) Provide such facilities and conditions as would facilitate the carrying out of the components of project activities in the countries;

4/ CIB - International Council for Building Research, Studies and Documentation
RILEM - International Union of Testing and Research Laboratories for Materials and Structures.

(iii) Undertake, as part of the implementation of the regional project, national projects geared to the promotion of local building materials, or strengthen on-going projects;

(iv) Make national experts available to participate in the activities of the project including study visits, expert meetings, establishment of pilot plants and construction of demonstration buildings.

15. The Joint Intergovernmental Regional Committee on Human Settlements and Environment has designated, as priority, the development of the building materials and oonsturction industries in the countries of the region. The proposed project, which will build upon the foundation already laid by ECA in this connexion, and complement on-going efforts by the ECA secretariat and other concerned organizations of the United Nations system, will help in achieving the objectives set by the committee for the building materials and construction sector. The committee should therefore accord priority to the implementation of the project and invite the Governments of member States of ECA to give it their fullest support.

CONCLUSION

16. The attainment of a genuinely self-reliant building materials industry in the countries of the African region demands a renewed political commitment by Governments to initiate, support and sustain actions that would help to overcome existing bottlenecks and prejudices, and lead to the increased use of locally produced building materials in housing and building projects. The dependence on imported building materials in the past has not only been expensive from the point of view of utilization of scarce foreign exchange, but has also led to serious shortages because of inability of many governments to allocate sufficient funds for the importation of such materials.

17. The project proposal on the improvement of local building materials (in Africa) of the ACC Task Force on Science and Technology for Development for which FAO has been designated the lead agency, and which will be implemented with the active collaboration of ECA and other concerned organizations of the United Nations System, will seek to strengthen the efforts underway in many countries in the region to deal with the chronic problems characterizing the supply of building materials for construction through increased exploitation of locally available resources.

18. African Governments are therefore, invited to commit themselves to an active involvement in the implementation of the project so as to complement and strengthen their own programmes for promoting the increased use of local building materials in housing and building in both urban and rural areas.

19. The Joint Intergovernmental Regional Committee on Human Settlements and Environment is hereby invited to lend its support to the project proposal since the successful achievement of the objectives of that project will contribute greatly towards the attainment of a self-reliant and self-sustaining building materials industry in the African region, which is a priority concern of the Committee.